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Wasted

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The social organization of Glendale, in the era before "movies" and motors, was a spiritual aristocracy with rank directly proportional to degrees of sanctity. In that community of the zealous, Mrs. Embree held high place. She was a quiet woman whose face had the worn fragility of a delicate fabric too roughly used. At meeting, its look of gentle abstraction was replaced by one of beaming rapture. She was the widow of Brother Embree, of sainted memory, an itinerant preacher whose lifelong headquarters had been a small rented farm near Glendale, whence he sallied forth at frequent intervals "on the Lord's business", leaving his wife, four girls, and a small son, Tom, to run the business of the farm. Tom was twelve when his father was called to forsake his earthly itinerancy for a celestial abiding-place, and, as the girls had married and gone, the widow moved to town and put Tom in school, supporting herself and him by taking in washing and doing plain sewing.

Her life was a forcible demonstration of the text: "Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth." She had

always had to work cruelly hard; she had lost three children in their infancy; and all her girls had married unwisely — godless men — two of them swearing western ranchers with tempestuous energies devoted solely to accumulation of the root of all evil. The youngest girl, Callie, — well, the least said about Callie, the better! She had taken up with the village disgrace, Amos Lawson, drunkard and professional loafer who at one time in his worthless career had served a term in the “pen” for stealing a calf. In a tumbledown shack on the outskirts of Glendale, she and her unmentionable spouse dragged on an outcast existence, the maintenance of which was shrouded in obscurity. But then, allowance should be made for Callie; she was never quite right — as a child, she had been called “simple”.

It was a subject of continual wonderment to Glendale that with the arrival of Tom’s maturity and the consequent increase in his money-getting powers, his mother’s toil did not slacken nor the number of garments fluttering from her line diminish. She worked just as hard when he was twenty-two and clerking regularly in Dixon’s Drug Store as she had when he was a small boy in school, picking up an occasional quarter by running errands. This was the one thing on the spotless and otherwise open page of “Sister” Embree’s life that savored of mystery — that Glendale did not understand — her silent, concentrated, unremitting toil; needless, surely, since Tom made enough to support them both. On this subject, she kept her own counsel even under pressure of direct

inquiry. But she was a liberal giver to the cause of foreign missions and contributed her full quota to the preacher's salary, and whatever her reasons for wearing out her life at the washtub, they were godly reasons.

It seemed a sort of sacrilegious incongruity that Mrs. Embree's next-door neighbor and closest friend should be Mrs. Murray, for Mrs. Murray was the village anomaly — an unsaved woman, a sinner, a lost soul. It should be noted that these terms are used in the technical Glendale sense and are not intended to convey the idea of wicked deeds on Mrs. Murray's part. Far from it! She was boundlessly large-hearted, and generous to a fault — an angel of mercy in times of sickness and need. So much more the pity that she should be "lost"! But lost she was beyond all human help, for Mrs. Murray was that most flagrant and daring of all the unrighteous, an outspoken "free-thinker" — an "infidel"! Not only did she disavow allegiance to any church she had ever known or heard of, but she had even hooted at certain tenets of the righteous. One of her most horrifying statements rang ever in the ears of Glendale, not only because of its blasphemy but also on account of a diabolical pseudo-logicality with which it was tinged. "Believe in hell!" she had said. "Why, sure I don't! I ain't no kid that's got to be threatened with a everlastin' whippin' to make him be good!"

Undoubtedly the devil had marked Mrs. Murray for his own. And yet to many the thought of heaven was mingled with a pang that she would not be there.

It was hard to think of Mrs. Murray, jovial, rotund Mrs. Murray who welcomed their babies into the world and closed the eyes of their dead, burning eternally in the lake of fire; and many a wet-eyed "sister" and shaky-voiced "brother", in the periodical revivals that racked Glendale, pleaded with her to renounce the error of her way. Though seldom seen at the regular church services, she attended revivals with fair regularity, having shockingly said she 'did love excitement'. As the wailing strains of "Almost Persuaded" or "Why not Tonight?" followed the sermon and the "invitation", they were wont to steal down the straw-covered aisles of the tent to where Mrs. Murray sat in the rear — a substantial reef of unconcern in a heaving emotional sea. She always listened with a kindly smile to their low-voiced urgings; but sometimes, when the crowd around her grew too dense and the summer temperature too sultry for endurance, she would firmly withdraw herself from the pleading, praying ring and relentlessly leave the tent, wiping her perspiring face and heaving a sigh of relief as she stepped out under the sky.

On the memorable night when eighteen-year-old Tom Embree made his tardy "profession", his mother had said in the testimony-meeting which followed the enfolding of this stray lamb, that her cup of joy would be full 'if only Miz Murray would give her heart to the Lord!' And Brother Murray, — it should be remarked that there *was* a Brother Murray, a futile, watery-eyed little man, — had roused himself from his chronic apathy of religious medi-

tation long enough to rise and ask the prayers of the entire tent for his erring wife. This was after Mrs. Murray had withdrawn.

It was a monstrous, an unbelievable thing, that she should remain obdurate under all the pressure exerted. But obdurate she was, surrounding herself with a wall of benevolent stoicism against which Glendale battered its spiritual head in vain.

And her ultimate fate appeared to weigh lightly on the prospective victim of eternal punishment. Had you seen her emerge from her door one spring evening at dusk and go through the side gate to the Widow Embree's, you would at once have remarked her care-free and irresponsible bearing. Her walk somehow gave the impression that, without the impediment of *avoids*, it would have been a skip; and — strange incongruity of feminine middle-age! — Mrs. Murray was whistling! Not a hymn tune, of course, but a frivolous air picked up from — heaven knows where!

As she passed the clump of wild-plum bushes half way between her fence and the Widow Embree's back door, she paused and stood listening. The widow was singing. Against the light window-shade, her shadow at the ironing-board stood out in spare silhouette, one thin arm moving back and forth in a sort of rhythm to the cracked falsetto drifting through the open door:

“Shall we gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river —
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God!”

Mrs. Murray threw out her hands in a pagan gesture of futility and lifted her eyes to the stars. Heaving herself up the back steps, she stood in the kitchen door, which her capacious bulk almost filled.

"Ironin', are you — this time of night?"

Mrs. Embree turned a face of pleased welcome. "Well, well, Miz Murray! Do come right in and set down. It's mighty nice to have comp'ny while you work. Have that rocker there."

"I didn't come to set in no rocker. I come to see why on earth you're a ironin' when you washed all day. Give me that there iron an' you set an' rest a spell. I'm a tryin' to reduce this spring — before the hot weather hits me — an' ironin's the best job I know to git up a good sweat."

Over-ruling the widow's remonstrances, Mrs. Murray thrust her in a chair and began to ply the iron vigorously. Mrs. Embree's flat bosom lifted in a sigh as she sank back in the rocker and closed her eyes. Against its starched, ravelled tidy, her face, with unheeded wisps of hair trailing across it, was a cameo of weariness, violet-shadowed and ashy. Mrs. Murray threw her a startled look; for the first time she saw her friend as an old woman. She was driving herself unmercifully — and to what end? Suspicion flamed in Mrs. Murray.

"Where's Tom?" she demanded. "Is he workin' tonight?"

Life flowed into Mrs. Embree's face. "Yes, this's his night in the store. He won't get in till after ten."

"Tom ought to be makin' right good money now," said Mrs. Murray with a set look.

"Oh, he does, Miz Murray! Why, Tom pays most of our livin' expenses." The widow sat bolt upright; there was pride in her voice.

Mrs. Murray set down the iron and faced her neighbor sternly. "Well, then I want to know what in the name of all that's holy makes you work like this?"

Mrs. Embree took on a curiously secretive expression — the look of one asked to divulge the hiding-place of carefully guarded treasure.

"You might's well know," her neighbor continued, "the town thinks maybe Tom don't do right by you."

The bony hands gripped the chair arms. "Oh, Miz Murray," she quavered, "there never was a better boy on earth than Tom. Of course he's careless sorter — bein' so young — and sometimes I worry he ain't more spiritual minded, but he's always good to me. He don't like for me to keep on washin' but I — I —" Again that guarding look.

"It ain't Callie, is it?" Mrs. Murray persisted. "Don't Amos make her a livin'?"

A reminiscent shadow clouded the faded eyes. "Oh, yes, she an' Amos 'pear to have enough to live on. She don't never ask me for money, though she does like fer me to come out oncet in a while an' hep her clean up. Callie never was right strong. She ain't to blame for nothing. It all come of what I went through before she was born. Her paw had got the call to preach an' it lef me with the spring plantin' to do."

She rose and advanced resolutely to the ironing board. "Now here, Miz Murray, you give me that there iron. You reckon I'm a goin' to set here an' see you do my work?"

Again she was forced into the chair. "You leave me be. I come over her to iron, and iron I'm goin' to! You say Mister Embree got the call to preach an' lef' you the plantin' to do?"

"Why, yes, Miz Murray. What else could he do? He got the call. It come clear as a bell one day when he was in the middle of a furrer, an' he dropped the lines right there and lef' the team stand, an' he come runnin' to the house an' sez to me: 'Mollie!' sez he, 'Hallelujah! The Lord has called me!' An' we both fell right down on our knees an' thanked the Lord. An' when we got up he says: 'Git my satchel, Mollie, an' pack it quick. I must be up an' away on the Lord's business.' — An' from that time on till he died he was gone from home most all the time."

Mrs. Murray walked to the stove, standing with her back to Mrs. Embree, and her wet forefinger hissed against a hot iron. Perhaps her action had the purpose of hiding the expression on her face, but all she said was: "Well, I just dare Jim Murray to git the call! If he did he'd wisht mighty soon he'd been deaf — even if we ain't got nary chick or child!" — and the thump with which she resumed operations on the stiff bosom of Deacon Oliver's white shirt emphasized her threat.

The widow seemed not to have heard. Her shining eyes were fixed on space as though she were reliving the spiritual exaltation of bygone days. "The Lord

spoke to Andrew direct," she said, "an' he heard him an' obeyed. He was one of the powerfulest preachers this country ever seen — they'll all tell you that, Miz Murray. Oh! If I could only be sure that Tom —"

"An' you an' the little childern" — interrupted Mrs. Murray, "how'd you manage to run the farm?"

The light vanished, leaving an old and weary face. "We done it," she answered grimly. "The girls was too small to hep much right at first an' it was pretty near more'n I could heft alone, so Andrew he made it a practice to be home a day or two each week to sorter straighten things out. At cotton pickin' time he was there a right smart."

"That was kind of him," said Mrs. Murray with wasted irony.

"An' the neighbors was good — so good! There was Miz Donaldson, a mile away. I'll never forget her — never. If it hadn't a been for her, I don't believe I'd a been alive today. It always seemed like when I couldn't go no further she'd happen in an' hep me out. The Lord sent her, I reckon. You remind me a lot of her, Miz Murray."

"Well, the Lord never sent me," said Mrs. Murray with a positive thump of the iron, "I come myself! But you ain't never said what makes you keep on workin' so hard now that Mister Embree's dead an' you don't have to?"

"No, I ain't never told no one, Miz Murray. It's a plan I got. I — I can't seem to talk about it — because I want it so bad, I reckon. Sometimes seems

like I could come nearer tellin' you than anyone — though you'd prob'ly be the last to fall in with it."

Into the deep eyes of Mrs. Murray, came that penetrating look that was their most characteristic expression. "You needn't tell me," she said. "I know. You're aimin' to make a preacher out of Tom."

Mrs. Embree started from her chair, her face aquiver. "How — how'd you know? I ain't never told no one — not even Tom."

"I know." Mrs. Murray was inscrutable. "But what makes you think Tom'll give in to be a preacher?"

"He told me so the night he was converted."

"That's four years ago."

"Yes, an' ever since then I been a savin' an' savin'."

The widow was standing; and her work-warped figure against the homely, speaking background of her pinched life — the soap-box shelf with its row of cracked plates, the rough-boarded wall, the old rocker — was yet dignified with something she had in common with the great of all ages, those whose lives have meant more than getting up and lying down, than eating and drinking, than breeding and dying, — consuming devotion to one unselfish purpose.

"I aim for him to be an *eddicated* preacher," she went on in a hushed voice. "I aim to get him into Sanders Theological next fall with enough money to fetch him through the first year without havin' to do no work but with his books. Then when he gets a

right start the rest of the time'll take care of itself. He'll be so int-rested, he'll be glad to work his way through."

"Well, I should hope —" began Mrs. Murray, but checked herself. Her uncanny insight had read the whole story: his mother's silence to Tom sprang from a nebulous and unacknowledged fear of his rejection of her plan — gay, careless Tom, whose roving fancy had never loitered on the beauties of education, whose youthful materialism had known no emotional upheaval save his spasmodic "conversion". The money, then, was to build a rampart around the forgotten path on which he had inadvertently set his feet. She knew this, did Mrs. Murray, the philosopher, far better than the mother before her who did not know but only felt.

To the silent two, each cloaked in her own thoughts, came the sound of swift staccato steps, up the cinder path, on the porch.

"It's Tom," his mother said; and with the words, Tom was in the room.

"Why, hello, Miz Murray!" His casual voice vibrated good nature. He was magnetic with vitality, like a sleek, contented animal.

"Hello, Tom!" There was an intangible something about Mrs. Murray that established immediate freemasonry with youth.

"Got any supper for me, Maw?" Tom's smiling brown eyes roved toward the safe.

"Yes, Tommie," eagerly. "But it's cold — greens an' corn bread. Let me make you some hot coffee." She was setting a place at the oilcloth-

covered table with quick, nervous sweeps of her thin arms.

"All right," he approved, but Mrs. Murray, from the ironing-board, interposed with genial firmness: "No, Tom, you don't want no coffee this time of night. It ain't good for boys that wants to pitch a good game of base-ball."

Tom laughed. "What a you know about me an' baseball, Miz Murray?"

"A heap! Bill Summers told me the other day when he passed the house, that you was the best pitcher he ever seen."

Tom's vivid face flamed red. "Bill Summers! Gee! Did he say that, sure-nough, Miz Murray? Why, Bill Summers he's *some* fan. Before he come to Glendale he seen all the big teams of the country. He watched New Orleans wallop Houston two year ago. And *he* said that!"

He seated himself and delved into the greens. "Bill he says he just can't understand why there ain't more int'rest took in base-ball here. Says it's the first burg he ever struck where you couldn't stir up four or five to watch a practice game. But he's tryin' to arrange for us to play Walnut Springs. They got some team over there. Let 'em bring 'em on! I got a curve that'll fix 'em or my name ain't Tom Embree."

Mrs. Murray, ironing steadily, listened with flattering attention and his mother, moving stiffly about putting away the ironed garments, paused for a moment and stood contemplating Tom at his meal in

an abandon of motherly admiration. The lamp light brought out the satin sheen of his forehead and cheeks, the faint dark down on his upper lip. Her adoring eyes left him and travelled through the open door to the opposite wall of the bedroom where hung an "enlarged picture" of Tom's father. The same sweep of dark hair from the forehead, the same straight nose, but a droop to the corners of the mouth that Tom's full lips did not have. Her eyes lingered on the picture. "If only!" she whispered, clasping her hands.

When Mrs. Murray left, Tom walked to the side gate with her, still talking eagerly. When he returned, his mother was leaning back in the rocker. "Why, Maw!" he cried. "You're lookin' awful tired! You been workin' too hard. You got to quit — there ain't no sense —"

"Tommie," his mother interrupted, "how'd you like to go off to school?" Her eyes, glazed with extreme fatigue, yet burned with an intensity almost frightening.

"Why — why — Maw," he stammered, "I don't know — I never thought about it. But you know I couldn't; there ain't no money. I — I got to stay home an' take care of you."

A half smile flickered to her lips — take care of her! "But supposin' there *was* money?" she persisted.

"Well, I reckon if a big enough wad just plumped right down from the sky so's I could do it up right, I might try it a fall. But what'd be the use, Maw? What —"

"You'll need it in your work, Tommie."

"My work?"

"Yes, your work for the Lord."

"Oh!" He turned away with a swift sidelong glance at her face. "Let's go to bed, Maw. You're awful tired an' so'm I."

She rose with a happy smile. 'If he could do it up right.' Well, he could! She had almost enough now.

Next day the spring sun shone down with summer's intensity and up from the horizon floated an impalpable grayness. "A norther before night!" prophesied Mrs. Murray at her door. "No peaches this summer. An' there's Miz Embree hangin' out a fresh wash. Clothes liable to freeze before they dry."

By four o'clock, Mrs. Murray's wide reputation as a weather prophet had been justified. With the fickle suddenness of the south, the weather had changed from peach-blow spring to wind-blown winter. The norther gripped the white sprays of wild-plum blossoms and shook them viciously, and biting sleet fell at dusk. Mrs. Murray, stiff-jointed since the first chill blast, groaned with rheumatic twinges as she watched the widow Embree taking the clothes from her line in the slanting fall. "Lordy! Lordy!" she remarked to Mr. Murray, just in from his grocery store and humped flabbily over the stove, "that woman'll take her death a cold."

Next morning Tom was at her door before she

had finished washing the breakfast dishes. His expression was as near a worried one as his sanguine face could wear. "Miz Murray," he said slowly, "I'd like fer you to step over an' see about Maw when you git the time. She don't seem to feel good. She did manage to git up this mornin' but just sets crouched over the stove with a red-hot fire a-burnin' an' her shakin' with the cold."

Before he had finished speaking, Mrs. Murray was reaching for her shawl, and as he turned away, with a relieved look, she was limping through the yard. When she entered Mrs. Embree's disordered kitchen, the widow turned a flushed face.

"It's the miz'ry in my side," she explained hoarsely, pressing her hand to her chest.

Without a word, Mrs. Murray half lifted her and led her to the bed in the other room. "Oh, no! Miz Murray, I can't go to bed; I've got a big ironin' to do."

"No, you hain't. That wash's goin' back rough-dried an' you're goin' to git into bed an' stay there. The very idea of a woman as old as you not knowin' better'n to run out of a hot kitchen into the teeth of a norther without no wrap on! I seen you! You can't say nuthin' to me!"

"But the cloes was gittin' ruint," quavered Mrs. Embree, like a child in extenuation of a fault; and, like a child, she subsided under the patchwork quilt and let herself be tucked in.

When Mrs. Murray had applied her unvarying and oft-proved treatment of hot drinks and hot poul-

tices and still the "miz'ry" had not abated but was rather assuming the proportions of a knife-like pain, she hesitated no longer but, going to the front gate, hailed a passing urchin and sent him for Doc Wilkins. Spring's tantrum had passed and the penitent sun glittered out from fleecy clouds. Mrs. Murray frowned absently in the direction of a gurgling mocking-bird on a limp and colorless peach spray and, going indoors, bestirred herself at setting the house to rights. To the urchin, returning importantly with the news that the doctor would be there soon, she entrusted the delivery of the various washings in their several stages of completion.

"Miz Murray," a thin voice called from the bedroom, "come here a minute." Mrs. Embree half sat up, clutching at her neighbor's sleeve; there was a patch of crimson on each cheek bone. "I want to ask you sumthin'; I got a hunderd an' seventy-three dollars an' eighty-five cents saved up. Don't you reckon if I kin make it two hunderd by the end of the summer, it oughter be enough to carry Tom through next year? At the start, he's got to pay down —"

"There! There! Sure it's enough." Mrs. Murray pushed her gently back among the pillows. "What you got right now's a plenty without you doin' another lick of work."

"No, it ain't," came the widow's obstinate answer. "It's got to be a 'big enough wad for him to do it up right'." With which incongruous speech, she sank back sighing.

Doc Wilkins, gray and deliberate as the nag that stood hitched at the front gate, shook his head dubiously as he opened his medicine case. "Mighty severe cold she's got — pretty near a case of pleurisy."

"Are you right sure it ain't pleurisy, Doc, or pneumony?" asked Mrs. Murray with the effrontery of a near partner. She and Doc Wilkins had been together at many a sick bed, and there were those who said Mrs. Murray was a better doctor than he.

"Well, now," he answered doubtfully, "it might be liable to run into pneumonia if it ain't checked. Give her one of these here gray powders every two hours an' one of the white ones whenever the pain gets bad. I'll drop in again about dark and see how she is." And Doc Wilkins ambled out.

When Tom returned from the store his mother was resting easy — Doc Wilkins' medicines were always soothing if not invariably efficacious — and his youthful spirits cast off their burden of worry at the indications that she would be up and about in a day or two. To Mrs. Murray, preparing his supper and broth for his mother, he explained with ardor the details of the last game.

"In a half hour Bill Summers he put me onto some of the greatest curves an' spitters you ever seen. I'm a dyin' for a sure-enough team to try 'em on."

Mrs. Murray listened absently as she stirred the broth. "Well, Tom, I'm goin' home to get Jim Murray's supper. You give your maw the medicine

on the table, when she wakes up, an' feed her this here soup. I'll be back in a hour or so. An' mind you take good care of her while I'm gone, Tom, — she's a sick woman! I reckon she'll pull through this spell all right, but we got to look after her better — see to it she don't work so hard."

Tom's face sobered. "Yes, Miz Murray, I'll do my best. She shan't never do another washin' — sure as I can knock a home run. I got a scheme that'll put her an' me both on easy street, I'm thinkin'."

"Well, I wisht I had time to talk about it," said Mrs. Murray with a tired sigh, "but I got to go. I'll lay down on the couch in your mother's room when I git back."

The next day was Sunday, and Tom was up early and gone from the house while Mrs. Murray was ministering to his mother. When she entered the kitchen, where were evidences of a hasty breakfast on the table, her face was worried. Mrs. Embree was worse — much worse. "Where's that boy?" she muttered, stepping to the door and glancing up and down the street. "Why ain't he here when he's needed? Like to know where in the Sam Hill he could have went to."

"Here you, Jim Murray!" she hailed her husband emerging from their door in his sabbath black. "You'll have to miss Sunday School this mornin'. Go tell Doc Wilkins to hurry up an' git here. Then walk out to Callie's an' tell her her maw's right sick."

Lingeringly laying down his Bible and Sunday School "quarterly" inside the door, Mr. Murray departed meekly on his mission.

When she returned to the sick room, Mrs. Embree had begun to stir restlessly and was gasping out broken sentences. "Yes, Andrew," Mrs. Murray heard, — "the Lord's will —" And when she laid a cool hand on her hot cheek, the sick woman said distinctly: "One hunderd an' seventy-three —" Under Mrs. Murray's hypnotic gaze, reason triumphed over delirium, and she looked up quite lucidly and whispered: "Miz Murray, I wisht you'd git me the box."

"What box?"

"Behind the clock," and she tried to point.

Going to the mantel, above which hung the enlarged picture, Mrs. Murray moved the heavy clock and took from behind it a flat tin box. It jingled as she laid it on the covers in reach of the groping hands.

"Count it," Mrs. Embree gasped.

Sinking heavily into the rocker beside the bed, Mrs. Murray took the box in her checked gingham lap and laboriously counted its contents. "One hunderd an' seventy-three dollars and eighty-five cents," she corroborated, "an' when you git the money from that last wash it'll be one hunderd an' seventy-five."

"Did — did I do the last wash I got? I can't seem to recollect."

"Why sure you done it," lied Mrs. Murray sooth-

ingly. "I'll put the money fer it in the box — it's in the kitchen."

"It — it won't take me long to make up the two hunderd, will it?"

"Why sure not! When you git up. But you gotter hurry an' git well. Tom an' me's goin' to make you promise not to work so hard."

The mention of Tom was ill-advised. "Where is Tommie?" his mother cried, starting up. "I want him!"

"He ain't home just now," said Mrs. Murray calmly. "I reckon he's went to Sunday School."

"Is today Sunday?"

"Why, sure."

"An' me not at church! Oh, Miz Murray, I'm awful sick! — the miz'ry in my side!" — And she turned her head and groaned. After swallowing one of the white powders, she relapsed into unconsciousness.

When Doc Wilkins saw his patient again he was frankly alarmed. "Why, it looks mighty like pneumonia," he said, delving almost briskly into his medicine bag.

"Not only does it look like pneumony — it is pneumony," said Mrs. Murray severely.

"Mighty serious," Doc Wilkins was muttering, "in a woman of her age —"

"Her age!" she cried in a tense undertone, pointing dramatically to the shrunken figure on the bed. "You think she's old, don't you? She ain't a day over fifty-five. She married awful young an' the life she's led made her look like a old woman before

her time. She ploughed an' farmed an' kep house an' had children — while *that*", — jerking her head at the picture of Brother Embree in his prime, "was rovin' 'round the country preachin'."

Doc Wilkins drew himself up stiffly, no doubt reminded that the day was the sabbath, that he was assistant superintendent of the Methodist Sunday School, and that he was listening to the judgment of an "infidel" on a noble servant of the Lord with more conversions to his credit than any other man that ever preached in Henderson County. "Brother Embree was a powerful fine man," he reproved. With an impotent snort, Mrs. Murray turned her back.

All day she was kept incessantly busy, tending the sick woman and answering the well-meant but troublesome inquiries of neighbors with their offers of assistance. Except one or two, she turned them away with the assurance that she could do what was necessary. About three o'clock Amos and Callie arrived.

Callie, blonde, wispy and slattern, burst into loud blubbering at sight of her mother's unconscious figure. "I never seen Maw in bed in the daytime before," she wailed. "I know she ain't goin' to git well."

Amos, bull-necked and scrubby-bearded, skulking in her rear, twisted his battered hat and glanced shiftily about.

Mrs. Murray thrust them from the sick room. "Set there," she directed, pointing to chairs in the

kitchen, in a corner of which Jim Murray drooped disconsolately over his Bible. He glanced up with vague reproach at Amos and Callie. Doc Wilkins, passive in frank futility, sat near the bedroom door, and Mrs. McGregor, a competent neighbor, was busy at the stove.

Mrs. Murray held undisputed sway in the sick room. As the afternoon dragged to its close, the widow's delirium increased; she continually muttered disconnected sentences or sang snatches of hymn tunes in a terrifying, unnatural voice. She was back in the days of her struggle on the farm. She fancied herself at the outdoor work — repeated the ghosts of commands to the team, of calls to the cows at milking time. She was in the cotton-patch and heaved breathlessly at the heavy dragged sack. She called the names of her children and once sobbed out, "Ruthie!" — evidently a baby that had died.

But the name she repeated oftenest was "Tom — Tom!" And finally as though its suggestion pierced to her groping mind, she climbed to semi-consciousness and said distinctly, "I want Tom, Miz Murray — I want him! Where is he?"

"I'll git him," promised Mrs. Murray, and went to the kitchen. "For the land's sake, don't none of you know where Tom is? He left this mornin' before I knowed it an' ain't been back since."

The inert group all shook their heads with the exception of Amos. A sardonic grin twisted his coarse lips. "I know," he gloated. "He's went to Walnut Springs to play base ball."

A combined gasp of horror went up from the group.

"Yeah," continued Amos importantly, "I heerd a crowd a young fellers a talkin' yistiddy about the game at Walnut this evenin'. Walnut's playin' Milo. They was several of 'em plannin' to go in Rube Echols' hack. They asked Tom would he go along an' he said 'no' — that his maw was sick an' 'sides it'd kill her if she thought he'd watch a ball game on a Sunday. Then Bill Summers he set in to beg Tom. Said he was goin' to umpire the game an' if either side needed a substitute he'd git Tom in. They walked off a talkin' — with Tom a shakin' his head an' Bill a arguin'. But Tom give in all right for this mornin' I seen him in the bunch that driv by my house in the hack."

In rigid immobility the group fixed scandalized eyes on Amos as though he were in some way responsible for Tom's dereliction. Mr. Murray turned quite blue about the mouth.

It was Mrs. Murray who took a step toward the cringing Amos and pointed her firm forefinger in his face. "Well, see here — you — you — be mighty sure you don't let that out so's Miz Embree hears it. Understand?" And she turned back to the bedroom.

The widow looked up seeingly. "I thought I heerd Amos."

"Yes, him an' Callie's come to see how you are."

"Where's Tom?" she cried tensely. "I want Tom!"

Mrs. Murray sat down by the bed and taking one of the parched hands in her cool grasp, fixed calm eyes upon Mrs. Embree. "Have you forgot what day this is? Sunday — Sunday evenin' a'most sun-down, an' Tom's at the young people's meetin'. This's his night to lead. He'll be home soon."

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Embree, her face transfigured. "I'm so glad! I been worried he wan't takin' a int'rest. But — but I hope he gits here soon. I got so much I want to tell him." And she clutched Mrs. Murray's hand as though to prolong her conscious moment. "Somehow I'm afeared that I —"

"Hush, hush!" said Mrs. Murray, turning away her face.

"I wisht you'd sing to me."

"What song?"

" 'Shall we Gather?' "

Then the listeners in the kitchen heard a strange thing. They heard the soothing contralto of Mrs. Murray — pagan, "unsaved" Mrs. Murray — raised in a "church tune".

"Shall we gather at the river —
The beautiful, the beautiful river —
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God?"

Callie half muffled a wail and the group, as by common consent, rose and stood about the door of the bed room. Mrs. Murray held one of the sick woman's hands in both her own and her eyes never left the sunken face over which the shadow was creeping.

As her voice thinned into silence, Mrs. Embree opened her inspired eyes on Mrs. Murray, and said breathlessly, "I could go so much easier if I only knowed you'd meet me there. Won't you be saved, Miz Murray? *Can't* you believe?"

In the moment of perfect silence that followed, every eye sought Mrs. Murray's round, pink face in which was concentrated such loving-kindness as to make it almost beautiful. And she, gazing into the eager soul of her friend, answered solemnly, "Yes, Miz Embree, I believe."

For that white lie, the Recording Angel, if indeed he takes note of such as Mrs. Murray who doubt his existence, entered a star by her name. The flush on the sick woman's cheek crept into radiance. "Thank God!" she murmured happily. "Thank God!" She closed her eyes for a moment. "An' Tommie, Miz Murray — you reckon he'll keep his promise?"

"I *know* he will. Tom's a good boy."

"The money —" gasped Mrs. Embree with a last effort. "If I go you'll see to that?"

"Everything," said Mrs. Murray huskily.

Her eyelids fluttering shut, Mrs. Embree whispered: "The last verse —"

As Mrs. Murray obeyed, two great tears fell on her checked apron.

"Yes, we'll gather at the river —

The beautiful, the beautiful river —"

And while she sang Mrs. Embree drifted into unconsciousness from which she never roused.

At midnight Tom returned. He was past the silent watchers in the kitchen and into the bedroom before they could stop him. They heard him cry out: "Maw! Maw!" and his loud sobbing, like a frightened child's, filled all the house.

In the half light of early morning, Mrs. Murray, returning from her much-needed rest, found him asleep on the floor by his mother's bed, his dark head cushioned on his arm. He looked pathetically young, with his tear-streaked face placid in oblivion, and the childless heart of Mrs. Murray yearned toward him. At her step on the bare floor, he started to a sitting posture and gazed at her bewildered. Then sickening remembrance distorted his face and unlocked his anguish.

"Oh, Miz Murray! Miz Murray!" he cried, burying his face in his hands.

Mrs. Murray sat down in the rocker by the still figure on the bed, and said quietly: "Come here, Tom." He obeyed blindly, kneeling at her side. "What made you go off?" she asked, stroking his hair.

"God knows!" he groaned. "Oh, Miz Murray! If I could only take it back! If I only hadn't done it! I knowed it was wrong when I sneaked out Sunday mornin'. I knowed I oughtn't er play ball on Sunday, but I thought Maw'd never find out — and then I had a plan. I hadn't no idea she was bad sick. Did she want me — did she know where I'd went?"

"She wanted you, but she never knowed. She

thought you was at the church-house — I seen to that."

Tom seized her roughened hand and pressed it to his face.

Drawing it away, she took him by the shoulders and compelled his blurred gaze to hers. "Tom Embree," she said slowly, "your mother killed herself for you. For four years, she saved her wash money — that was her very heart's blood — so's you could go off to school an' be a preacher."

Tom drew back sharply. "Me a preacher!" he cried.

"You said you'd be, four years ago when you was converted."

"Oh, *then!*" said Tom. In the two words was epitomized all the cruel casualness of youth. Mrs. Murray's hands fell to her sides.

"I knowed she hadn't forgot," he went on, "but I didn't rightly sense she was plannin' on it an' savin' the money she slaved for. Oh, God! I've been sinful! I've been selfish an' mean! I let Maw kill herself before my eyes — without tryin' to stop her." He sobbed aloud.

"The only way you kin make it up," said Mrs. Murray solemnly, "is to carry out her wishes."

Tom threw back his head and spoke rapidly, in a hushed voice as though to keep his words from carrying to the bed: "I can't! I can't! Not to save my life! It ain't in me to be a preacher any more'n it's in you to be a church member. I know I said it that night — but that don't count. They git a feller all worked up with their prayin' an' singin' an' he

don't rightly know what he's about. Why, Miz Murray, I ain't even a believer!"

"Not — a believer, Tom!" Her voice was a startled whisper.

"No! no more'n you! I can't see nothin' in it — but I couldn't let Maw know."

"Of course not."

He looked up into her comprehending eyes, and buried his face in her lap.

For a while she was silent, absently stroking his hair, her troubled, pitying face turned to the dead one on the bed as though imploring forgiveness for a breach of trust.

"The money, Tom — you must use that for an education."

"Yes," he said huskily, "I'll sure do that."

"Go to the mantelpiece and get the box behind the clock."

Tom obeyed. "It's awful light," he said.

Mrs. Murray opened it. "It's empty!" she gasped. "It's empty!" Instantly she had a vision of a figure slinking from the house the night before. "I know who stole it," she cried, starting to her feet, "that low-down Amos! Tom, your mother had the better part of two hundred dollars saved up — we got to get it back!"

With her hand on the door, Tom halted her. "It wouldn't do no good to try," he said with finality. "He'd lie out of it. And the only way to get it would be to have the law on him an' that'd mean the pen for him again — an' there's Callie."

"Listen, Miz Murray, listen," he continued rap-

idly, "maybe it's fer the best — seems as if it'd a kilt me to use that money of Maw's — an' anyway, there ain't no need. When I went to Walnut yis-tiddy it was partly for her. I told you I had a plan. You know how much money ball players make — perfessionals, I mean? Well, Bill Summers knew for certain the manager from Dallas was goin' to be there, — said the Dallas team was out for a pitcher. I figgered if I could git on one of the big teams it'd put me an' her on easy street — an' I fin'ly let Bill persuade me to go. Well, it was just like he said. The Dallas man got me to sign a contrack to pitch for 'em this season. When you told me about Maw an' the money I didn't mean to say nuthin' about this but just go on an' do as near like she wanted as I could. But now there ain't no money, it's different, ain't it? I could save enough in a year for two years' schoolin'."

"Yes, but Tom, would you?"

"Before God, I will, Miz Murray!"

But Mrs. Murray, reader of hearts, looking into the boyish face, grief-sharpened into lines of determination, was not so sure. Again her troubled eyes implored the peaceful face across the room.

Finally, she said slowly: "Well, it can't be helped."

"What, Miz Murray?"

"Nothin', Tom, nothin'. You go to the kitchen an' let Miz McGregor give you a cup of coffee."

He left Mrs. Murray standing motionless in the middle of the sun-brightened room, looking at the empty tin box in her hand.

Joe

By EDWIN FORD PIPER

I

THE CABIN

In a waste corner by the river bank
Joe's shack had homed. You pushed in through the
weeds

And came upon the creature. She was formed
Of junk and driftwood: puncheon plank redeemed
From the flooding water; a square of fancy zinc;
Rusty sheet iron, barbed wire, and gunny sacks
Patched in with careless carpentry; the door,
Grained oak with a bronze knob, no touch of paint.
Joe used his luck as it came. Plenty of cracks
For light and air; for window, — well, one board
Hung from three leather hinges, — hook it up
Or let it hang. At labor by the day
Joe might have bought good stuff and built a
cabin, —
Meanwhile —

There was a grassy riverside
With oak and walnut trees, and next the stream
A pebbly landing cove among the willows
Where red-winged blackbirds chuckled, or at sunset
Quarrelled for choice of lodging; and above,
The untrodden grama flourished delicate leaves
Round milkweed flower and aster. — Lazily

The skiff swung with the current, hour by hour,
While Joe sat hunched with eye upon the bobber,
Musing between the puffs of his short clay pipe
Upon the dragonflies and water-skippers
And the colors of the summer.

Joe's round face
Would laugh a greeting if some touselled boy
Came for a skiff ride or for a tricky puzzle
Cleverly whittled. And the man was clean,
And kept himself clean-shaved and not much ragged.
And he could laugh down slurring words when
mothers
Classed him with poorhouse folk and feeble-minded,
Unless they said: "Bad company for youngsters."
Then he was downcast, silent, maybe angry.

For Joe — Joe was the village unreliable.
Hire him for tomorrow he'd show up
Most like a week from Thursday: "Fishin' was
good;"
Or, "I plum forgot it early in the morning
Till it was too late for a full day's work;
Sorry, and —"

Well, they asked him at the trial
The length of time he stuck to his longest job.

"Five weeks."

"What doing?"

“Shootin’ prairie dogs,
Was killin’ the trees on Wilson’s timber claim.
Trees is a bit like folks.”

His trial? Yes.
You see, they put Joe in the County jail,
Charge of pig-stealing.

II

JOE’S ACCOUNT

“It was the tenth of May. I skiffed across,
Mid-afternoon, and fished the swimmin’ hole,
And got two cats about a pound and a half
Apiece; I see some bees and stepped ashore,
Look for a tree; and comin’ back I saw
A middlin’ size red shote aboard the skiff,
Notch in his ear and white spot in his forehead,
Gobblin’ the last of the fish. Pig wasn’t scared;
I rowed home, and he scrambled out and followed, —
Squealed when I shut the door, kept wantin’ in.
I give him a little rope in the high grass,
And fed him good; and he was glad to see me, —
Would grunt and curl his tail. Ain’t ary shote
In Melrose County furnished better quarters
Nor better bringin’ up.”

“You stole that pig.”

“He et my bait and my fish. And you might say
He just come home with me — was trespassin’
About my house.”

"But you don't own that place."

"I rent it. I give three days work a year."

"You are a loafer. You lie round there drunk!"

"O no, not that. I — well, maybe I do
Sometimes take a drop too much. The Fourth and
Christmas

Come only once a year. They never print
I'm off to Kansas City, legal business;
Be gone a week. One day's enough for me."

"You are a thief. The calaboose will cure you."

"I ain't a thief. I would a took him back,
But Zeba Yellaneck borrowed off my skiff."

III

LODGINGS

From lad to lad shrilled feverishly the news
Of the jailing. Up frothed boyish sentiment
Quickly fermenting, dissipating: for red
And green on weather-beaten barn and crib
Flamed circus bills, — ah, rich to the childish mind
As clover bloom to bees.

One youngster's eyes
Devoured them while he drummed his bare heels sore
In urging Dobbin townward. Up the street
High colors led him to the courthouse square; —
Yes, even on the jail, — circus posters!
Well, why not visit Joe?

The boy's bare feet
Measured the courthouse gloom, moved on across
The deep red clover to a squat frame building
Beaten by sun, blanketed with foul odor,
Besieged with flies.

A voice said: "Damn the lice!"
He saw a man on a bunk. Could that be Joe?
Unshaven, wrinkled, with the crazy eye
Of a penned brute?

"Johnny?"

"Yes, Joe."

"Are you comin' back to town?"

"On circus day."

"Yes? Would you do me little favor?
Go to my house and bring my overalls,
My hatchet and thick-bladed butcher knife,
I'm whittlin' a big puzzle. Keep it secret.
Just you and me. And sneak me in the bundle,
When the parade is due. You won't tell no one."

"No, double-deed, I'll never. Joe, this place
Is awful, makes me sick."

"Don't say you been here.
And maybe now, I am bad company."

Good-bye to you, Johnny. Wish we could go swimmin'."

IV

ACCESSORY

Next week the Melrose Herald burst its buttons
Over the jail delivery. What sensation!
"We catch a desperate criminal; other thugs
Fearing betrayal help this jailbird out:
Find the accessory, let him rot in prison
Life-long!"

There was a barefoot village boy
On whom the word *accessory* could bring shivers;
And after all these years that word can thrill him.
He learned of late that somewhere out in Kansas
Along a little stream, a cabin shelters
A round-faced laughing man who lives by fishing,
Gives skiff rides to the boys and whittles puzzles.

"A bit like Joe," he says: "I am accessory."

A Letter to Mary

By MABEL K. RICHARDSON

Unto the white narcissus that you sent,
Offering its timorous cheer at Christmas tide,
A new and tender radiance is lent
Since came the message saying you have died.

There in the window — how you loved the light —
I set it where the morning sun shines first.
So like your happy face, star-eyed and bright
With wonder. Like you for life athirst.

Last night at dusk you passed me in the street,
I turned — but there was no one there to call;
And once the breakfast room grew swooning sweet
With the remembered fragrance of your shawl.

Almost I heard your step upon the stair, —
The silken frou-frou of your party dress.
And in the shadow once your heavy hair
Fell as it would, cloaking your loveliness.

Not yet; perhaps when this your flower is dust
I may admit that what they tell is true.
But while your white narcissus blooms I must
Refuse the door to death lest you slip through.

Editorials

Writers in *Poetry* have reprimanded poets sharply for their neglect to pay homage and render tribute to scientific research and its heroes. Under the whips and scorns, the poets are moveless and voiceless. By my fay, they can not reason; else they too would be heroes and not poets. Moreover, they have not the tribute; their trade has not provided them with tools to work upon the materials offered.

Though poets can not reason, their equipment has been thought to include taste. The attic-dweller is hesitant to intrude in the palace unless by way of returning a courtesy. Manifestly it would be absurd for science to recognize poetry when they meet; and there the matter ends.

Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. He has the powers and principalities, but poetry is not his.

A scientist endowed by Mr. Carnegie, Mr. Rockefeller, and the State recently permitted inspection of one of his twenty-dollar federal reserve notes. The obverse of this note does engine-wrought homage to a politician. The reverse, also engine-wrought, scientifically depicts a locomotive, an airplane, an automobile, a steamship, a tug-boat, and the Woolworth building. All these are at left and right of what artists would call the centre of attention. This centre of attention, which other times and countries might have given poetry, is blank.

Caesar has the things that are Caesar's, and more. There are endowments, though endowments have not yielded the locomotive, the air-plane, the automobile, the steam-ship, the tug-boat, or the Woolworth building, as they have not advanced teaching. Let us lift up our eyes unto the hills from whence cometh our help; let us render to God the things that are God's.

The nature of poetic art makes poetry come easier about Achilles, Roland, St. Francis, or the Cotter than about Hippocrates, Mr. Darwin, or Mr. Westinghouse.

The overhead politics of the world has gone to pieces. First, the war, insane with ambitions, mad with cruelty; then the peace, hollow and phantasmal; last, the progressive disintegration of peoples and institutions, like the crescendo of a plague passing from member to member of the body of society and consuming all. European civilization is in wrack, and here in America, where seemed and perhaps indeed is the peak of the world's fortune, every passing period of time marks new disillusion of our better hopes. Our economic life is a perpetually trivial quarrel; our politics is filled with dust and fustian; and, most grievous of all, the superb idealism which made of us in the last hours of the great war and the first moments of peace, the very avatar of the world's hope, this is steadily crumbling into bitterness and cynicism and the narrow-eyed selfish-

ness of men who have lost faith in their times. "Forget Europe; we have troubles of our own," and the ominous, "Let us get back to earth," these are the counsels, callous and calculating, wherewith men are repudiating all that was generous and noble in the emprise of our chivalry, and upon which the dismal public commentary has been the puppet-show of political jealousy.

Forget? Forget Europe? Forget our generous dead? Forget the past that has made us? Forget father and mother and the high confession of historic years? Forget, indeed!

Helpless and embittered, to many a man for the moment it is a temptation. For me the philosopher's cloak tight-drawn, he cries; for me the serene seclusion of mine own hedge-row within which the garden shall bloom for none other eyes but mine; for me the tower of ivory!

And then, reminiscently moved, we turn to Gautier's passage, published in the *Revue de Paris* in 1851: "We have no desire to immure ourselves, even in a tower of ivory, outside the contemporary movement." Gautier wrote in 1851, and in 1851 a mock Napoleon called himself emperor in France; Prussia had but just broken the hope of freedom in Germany; all Europe was steeped in arrogant reaction. Yet the spirit of man should not be cloistered: the energy of thought, the energy of art, should begin anew, working in the hard soil of deadened hopes, slowly and painfully preparing for the distant florescence.

From beside the new-made grave one returns with a heavy heart to labor under the indifferent sun; it requires courage, it requires faith, to begin once more after defeat; there is no distinction to be won, no recognition to be hoped for, in the days of the first resumption; but there is a reward, in the consciousness that we are men, using those gifts which alone lift us above the brute, exercising those powers of thought and imagination which in the end are the levers that move human destiny and lay for mankind the deep foundations of a spiritual estate.

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